

**“A concerted effort to preserve our heritage is a vital link to our cultural, educational, aesthetic, inspirational and economic legacies – all of the things that quite literally make us who we are.”**

### Railways in Asansole: Early days

It was Saturday, 3rd February 1855, that the first train made its inaugural journey between Howrah and Raneegunge, connecting seat of imperial power and port to coal fields, and ushering economic development in the region. Railways would catalyze and spur coal production in entire coal bearing area covering mines of Raneegunge, Giridih, Jharia and Palamu, bringing prosperity and growth in the region. Small sleepy villages would be transformed into thriving industrial centers accelerating rapid urbanization proving the prophecy of Lord Bacon:

*There be three things,” says Lord Bacon, “which make a nation great and prosperous, a fertile soil, busy workshops, and easy conveyance for men and commodities from one place to another.” “Railways are, assuredly, next to the invention of printing, the most powerful instrument of civilization that the ingenuity of man has ever devised.”*

The route to Raneegunge was the experimental line sanctioned by Dalhousie, Lieutenant Governor as the original plan of EIR was to lay track between Howrah and Delhi, via Rajmahal, following the course of the Ganges, by the route, which is now known as the loop line; an interesting case of main line turning into loop line.

Construction of Railways, by East Indian Railway company, was one of the largest infrastructure project ever undertaken in the world those days, which became not only a great money spinner for the overseas investors with its smart guaranteed returns but also proved to be a great strategic decision for the Company.

It is interesting to note that first ever use of Railways in rushing military reinforcements at the time of Santhal rebellion took place at Raneegunge only.

Troops would be rushed from Calcutta to Raneegunge by Rail before being dispatched to Dina-pore, Allahabad, Cawnpore and other cities during first war of independence tilting the balance in favour of East India Company. Railways proved to be a mighty force multiplier as movement of troops and ammunition could be done in a same day between Calcutta to Raneegunge, which would earlier take 8 to 10 days.

Lord Dalhousie had envisaged that, this Railway scheme would prove advantageous in enhancing internal security. It would enable the government to bring immediately the *“bulk of its military strength to bear upon any given point”* to an extent that was *“physically impossible” at the time.*

Surprisingly EIR was pioneer in running time tabled goods train, which even now, IR is finding difficult to emulate and unable to juggle the fixed schedule of goods trains in time tables of coaching trains in routes, highly saturated with regular introduction of new coaching trains.

One mixed train, consisting of goods wagons and one first class carriage, would leave Howrah 8.30 P.M. every night and would reach Raneegunge 6.35 A.M. everyday, the first incidence of running time tabled goods train in the world.

Similarly, in down direction the goods train along with first class carriage would start from Raneegunge at 8.30 P.M. every night and would reach Howrah at 7.40 A.M.

EIR was also operating ferry services to and fro from Calcutta with matching timings for all trains services starting from Howrah, except for mid night trains, for the benefit of passengers, one of the early pioneers of intermodal transport service in the world.

Rowland Mcdonand Stephenson was the first agent of EIR in India; the company office was at 29, theatre Road Calcutta and not at Fairlee, which was office of a trading house and much later after

the liquidation of the company, it would house the EIR, after being acquired in 1879. From Theatre road, Agent's office was shifted to Writer's buildings Dalhousie Square in 1860s, and it was called East India Railway House.

Asansole became centre of Railway operation in the region, eclipsing Raneegunge, the original Rail hub. It was upgraded to Divisional Headquarter in 1922, encompassing the geographical area of present Dhanbad Division. Coal mines and Railways transformed Asansol subdivision from wilderness to one of the busiest industrial centre of the country.

EIR provided land and buildings for local schools like St. Patrick, E.R.Boys's High School, municipality, church and virtually constructed the entire Asansol town. Asansole steam loco shed had distinction of being the largest locomotive shop in Asia during the period.

Railways not only provided speedy and cheaper mode of transportation for coal but were also one of the largest producer and consumer of the coal, setting benchmark for production and rate for the industry. Though the coal was discovered in 1774, but, production and dispatch of coal from Raneegunge coal fields remained sluggish for 80 years, till the Railway tracks were laid in the region.

East Indian Railway Company collieries not only ensured a steady supply of coal against the vagaries of market production but also helped the Company to make a substantial saving in fuel component of the working expenses, turning EIR into most efficient & lowest cost Rail carrier in the country. Average load of goods train for EIR was 109 Tonnes, highest in the country. Average profit on each ton per mile was 6.672 pies, the highest amongst all Rail companies in India.

The Revenue account of EIR for the half-year ending 30th June 1855, showing the operations of the line, from Howrah to Raneegunge was quite encouraging. The gross receipts were two and a half lakhs of rupees, while the expenditure was under a lakh and seventy thousand, leaving the profits some-what over rupees eighty thousand. Earnings from the experimental line proved the prophecy of lord Dalhousie , which he had written in famous minutes of July 4, 1850, outlining his vision and future course of Railways in India:

*"The object of that experiment is to prove, that, not only that it is practicable to construct Railway in India as engineering work but that such Railway was constructed will, as commercial undertakings, afford a few remunerative return on the money which has been expended in the construction"*

Introduction of East Indian Railway brought a reliable and large communication network in the coal belt and Bengal as a whole first time as the East India Company Government had not adopted any constructive policy regarding the development of communications.

The entire stretch between Burdwan and Raneegunge, which falls within territorial boundary of present Asansol division, had initially only two stations, Mankoor and Panaghur and it continued till 1861. Between 1861 to 1867, four more stations ( Asansole, Sitarampore, Burrakur and undall) were opened in Asansol area.

Construction by EIR was done at very rapid pace; it was a race against time, a construction against all odds amidst extremely challenging field conditions: swampy land, rivers prone to flood, onslaught of diseases wiping out more than 4000 workers a month, for some weeks no less than eight to ten percent of the workers employed died weekly and massive disruption during freedom struggle. Average deployment of men per day in year 1890-91 by EIR was more than 1lakh 18 thousand persons as excavators, brick makers, brick layers, sawyers, carpenters, blacksmiths and laborers. Sacrifices of these unsung heroes, who led down their lives for building Rail infrastructure, have been sadly buried in the footnotes of history. It is said that each sleeper of EIR track was laid only after burial of a man in the embankment.

The Indians, who had honor of being first station masters of Paanagurh (Nobinchunder Mookerjee was first station Master Paneghur) and Mankaar (B.Mookerjee was first station manager Mancoor),

have faded from public memory. We want to highlight such great pioneers, who had played a key role in Railway operation those days.

Eastern Railways Asansol Division had embarked on ambitious task of identifying and preserving our rich Railway heritage especially those majestic living Railway buildings waiting with a bated breath to tell their stories. A number of such buildings having priceless architecture, after decades of neglect and abandon, were on the verge of demolition but could be salvaged and restored just in time.

A heritage walk has been scheduled on 28<sup>th</sup> November 2018, first time in Asansol after 163 years of coming of Railways in the area, to create awareness of our legacy, to underline the unique role of Railways in shaping the growth of the region and to embark on the journey to preserve our rich heritage.

Asansol Division would publically commemorate the event, involving all our stake holders and bring our glorious heritage to the fore, as the historic day, the 3<sup>rd</sup> February, the dawning of Railway age in the region, has sadly been forgotten by most of Railway men and general public alike.

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